

RPG Reload File 050 – 'The World Ends With You: Solo Remix'

[August 6, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we celebrate our one-year anniversary not with cake, but with potions. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the present day. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the overall scheme of things, and to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow for. I try to present a balanced plate to represent the genre from week to week, but if there's something you feel like I'm missing, please let me know. You can do so by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#).

This column marks the official end of the first year of **RPG Reload**. Counting the two holiday specials, we've been at this for 52 weeks in a row. It's quite a feat, and I'm thankful to all of the readers for their support. When we started the **RPG Reload**, it was something quite unlike anything else on TouchArcade. Since then, more and more editorial content and regular features have appeared on the site. I'd like to think we blazed the trail for that, friends. Anyway, with the end of a year comes a few changes. So we're going to talk a little business before we get to today's game. If you've been following in the forums, this is old news, but hey, we're RPG fans, we're used to a little repetition.



First of all, the monthly reader's choice articles are coming to end with today's column. As it turned out, people were mostly happy with my selections. Recent months in particular proved to be a desperate scramble to get some suggestions. On top of that, I'm not going to lie: gunning through an RPG every week in addition to my regular duties here at TouchArcade has been pretty tough. With that in mind, I'll be retiring out the reader's choice to give myself a bit more time to stretch my adventuring legs with the other games for the month. But don't worry, as there will be a replacement. For the second year, I'm going to be doing a twelve-part series on the history of handheld RPGs, from the very beginnings all the way up until today. It should be fun! And probably more work than just playing another game each month!

The next bit of business is particularly exciting for me. We're going to be collecting the first year of the **RPG Reload**, along with a little bonus content, into a book. It will be available as an e-book, of course, but you'll also be able to own an actual physical copy if that's your fancy. I can't promise an exact date on that, as it's more or less on the trusty "when I finish" schedule, but hopefully it's something some of you are interested in. If not, well, at least I'll

have a new bug-smasher. If it goes well, you can probably expect yearly collections of this column for as long as I'm doing them. Anyway, thanks for bearing with all this meta-talk. Let's get on with today's game!



I'll level with you fine folks, I was a little worried that I wouldn't get to write this game up. I probably don't need to remind anyone, but for several months, it appeared that the iOS version of *The World Ends With You* ([\\$17.99](#)) was finished for good. I had originally scheduled it in for late May, adamant that Square Enix wouldn't possibly let it go longer than that. Well, I was close, at least. Since we're all friends here, I'll let you in on a little secret: I'm one of this game's biggest boosters. I consider it at least as significant a game as *Chrono Trigger* ([\\$9.99](#)), and although it didn't sell big numbers, *The World Ends With You* has had a clear influence on the JRPG genre. This is a game that held up many of the systems we take for granted in the sub-genre and honestly asked why we needed to adhere to them. I'm not surprised it didn't catch on. I think there's no way it could have. But I'm very glad it exists.

The origins of *The World Ends With You* lay in the *Kingdom Hearts* team at

Square Enix. With *Kingdom Hearts 2* upcoming, series producer and zipper enthusiast Tetsuya Nomura wanted to do a side project. The purpose of the side project was to bridge the gap between the end of the first game and the beginning of the second, but also to explain why protagonist Sora had his abilities set back significantly. Nomura was hesitant about doing such a project on the relatively weak Game Boy Advance, but when he heard kids wanted to play the series on their favorite handheld, he relented. Key Square Enix personnel worked with Jupiter, a Kyoto-based company that specialized in handheld development. Together, they developed *Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories*, a story-heavy action-RPG with a unique card battle system. The developers did their best to recreate the crowded 3D battles of the console games on the small screen, giving players full 3D movement of their character and putting a number of enemies on-screen at any given time. You had to dodge and weave around until your desired cards came up, then get into position and fire them off. This is essentially the prototype for the battle system that would end up being used in *The World Ends With You*.



Chain Of Memories was a modest success, and once it was finished, Square Enix wanted to work with Jupiter on another project, this time for Nintendo's

DS. Development started in late 2004, while *Kingdom Hearts 2* was still in the midst of production. Several members of the development team had played around with Nintendo's new hardware, and they begin to think about a special version of *Chain Of Memories* where the card game would play out on the bottom screen and the action would occur on the top. It's just my speculation, but I suspect the reason it ended up not being a *Kingdom Hearts* game is due to the *Kingdom Hearts* team not having a clear enough plan at the time for where they wanted to take the story of the series. Their desire to make full use of the DS's capabilities had them focusing on the touch screen, but they soon ran into the familiar problem of people ignoring the other screen.

I'm not sure how far they thought this through, but the end result was a very unique, and somewhat chaotic, two-screen battle system. The main character would be controlled on the bottom screen entirely with touch controls, while the partner character on the top would be controlled with buttons. It's a system that some people can never get used to, but the developers fortunately foresaw that and had the partner character go on automatic if they didn't receive input for a certain period of time. Another major revelation, and one that worked a bit better, was the encounter system. Rather than have the player bump into battles randomly, the developers put the frequency of combat directly in the player's hands. You could choose when you wanted to fight, how often you wanted to battle, and even how hard the battle would be. Difficulty could be adjusted on the fly, with harder encounters coughing up better rewards. The game also made use of a clock, rewarding players who took long breaks from the game with experience bonuses, and even used an early version of the now-ubiquitous StreetPass, where players could earn rewards for passing by another player with the game in "mingle mode". Even in Japan, that feature didn't get much play, regrettably.



The game's title in Japan translates to *It's A Wonderful World*, a title that had to be abandoned internationally due to Disney owning the rights to using the words 'wonderful' and 'world' beside each other in any media, apparently. Originally, the idea was that the game would take place in various real locations around the world, but the developers quickly realized that wasn't feasible. They ended up settling on Shibuya as the setting, a decision which then informed much of the rest of the game's design. That trendy area of Tokyo's obsession with fashion and trends changed the cards from *Chain Of Memories* into pins, and it naturally followed to have various fictional brands that would compete for popularity. Although the perspective is skewed, anyone who has spent any time in the real Shibuya will immediately recognize it in-game. The challenge, then, is to teach people who haven't been there about things many Japanese players would simply know. The character designs also came as a result of the setting. As ridiculous as many international players might think Shiki, Neku, and others look, they're all based on styles that were popular around that time. Yes, even the silly giant hat.

In Japan, the game released in July of 2007. Although its opening was strong

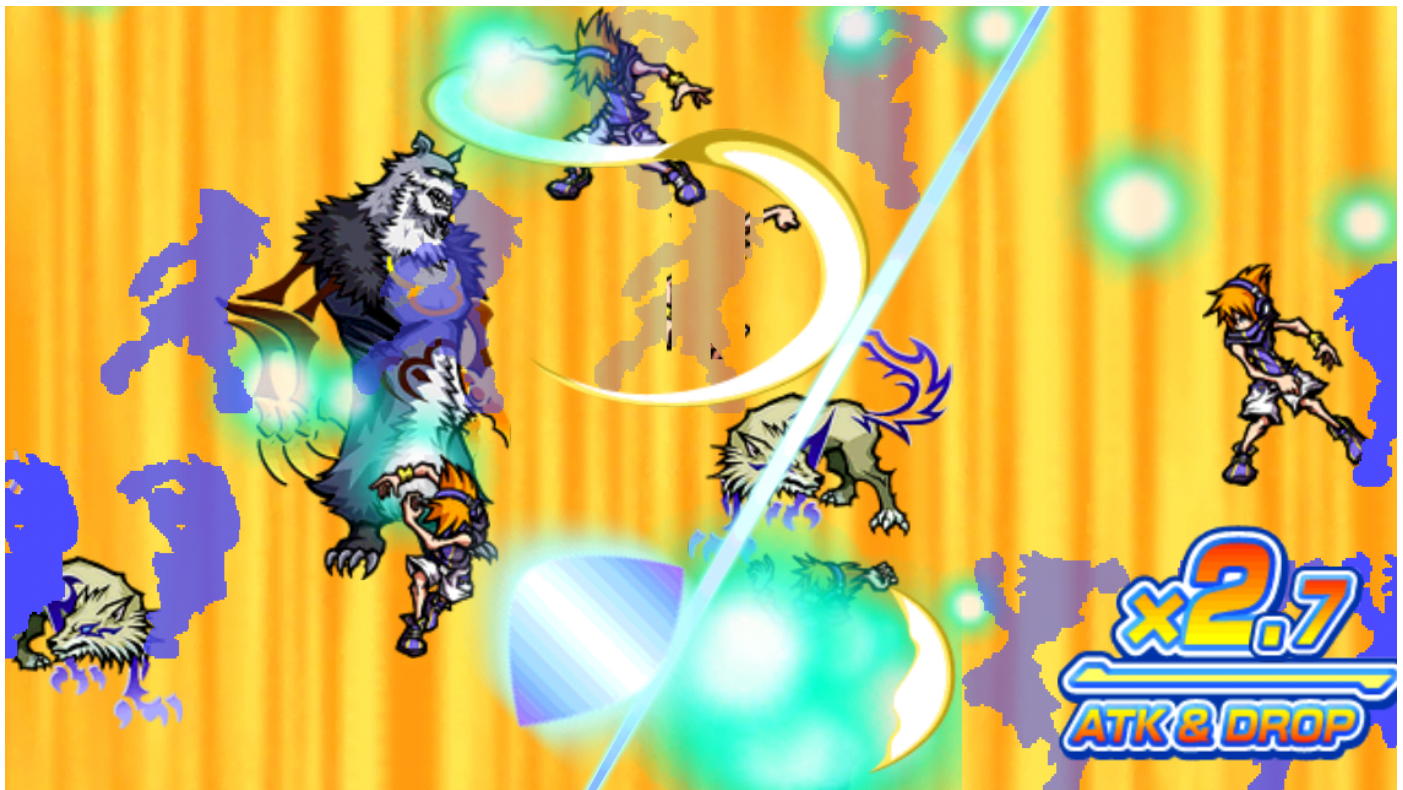
relative to many other titles, the game greatly underperformed expectations, failing to break the 200,000 copies sold mark in its lifetime in Japan. I remember plucking a brand-new copy of the game out of a bargain bin in a department store in February 2008 for about \$10. Come to think of it, that's the lowest price I've ever paid for a copy of this game. Not letting that setback get them down, Square Enix announced in December of 2007 that the game would get an international release under the title *The World Ends With You*. It was certainly a long shot. It's not as though games filled with Japanese culture hadn't found success overseas before, but very few games so heavily built around contemporary Japanese culture had even released in the West, let alone succeeded. In a rare case of fortunate timing, however, *The World Ends With You* ended up releasing not long after *Persona 3* had hit the US to a fairly solid reception. A niche had shown it was willing to accept games heavily imbued with modern Japanese culture. The game released in the US and Europe in April of 2008 to rave reviews from critics and players alike, and in a bit of an upset, went on to sell more copies overseas than it did in its home country.



Unfortunately, it was merely a modest success for a company that was

increasingly focused on scoring big hits. Not only was a sequel not in the cards, but even ports seemed out of the question due to the game's unusual set-up. It looked like the game was meant to be a beautiful one-off. Jupiter went off to make a billion more *Picross* games, while the *Kingdom Hearts* team joined up with Sapporo-based developer h.a.n.d. to produce a couple of mobile and handheld *Kingdom Hearts* spin-offs, along with a couple of internally-developed handheld *Kingdom Hearts* projects. That was that, then. That is, until August 2012, when Square Enix put up a countdown site that seemed to be teasing a new *The World Ends With You* project. The speculation ran wild, and hopes went through the roof until Square Enix accidentally spilled the beans via their online store, revealing the project to be an iOS version of the original game. It was kind of a poor move on Square Enix's part. By hyping it up so much, what should have been a pleasant treat for hungry fans instead became a huge letdown. The clock finally counted down, officially revealing *The World Ends With You: Solo Remix* for iOS.

It's too bad things went the way they did, because I feel like *TWEWY* fans were so disappointed that they ended up feeling spiteful towards the port/remake. Square Enix would give fans two chances to show their enthusiasm for the IP, and circumstances led to both confirming what Square Enix had believed: that there was no market for a second game. I'm not going to spend too much time talking about the second "failed test", *TWEWY* hero Neku Sakuraba's appearance in *Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance* for the Nintendo 3DS. That was always going to be a outside chance for the series at best. But *Solo Remix* was obviously laying down track for another game, with a special ending that outright teased a follow-up. It ended up being a situation where virtually everyone shot themselves in the feet. Okay, setting sour grapes aside for a minute, *The World Ends With You: Solo Remix* released almost immediately after the countdown finished worldwide. It was a fairly extensive reworking done by h.a.n.d., but it did a great job of capturing most of what made the DS version so great in spite of major hardware differences. In fact, many people prefer the way it handles combat.



Specifically, combat obviously has to take place on one screen now, so both Neku and his partner will fight alongside each other. Certain boss fights had to be reworked to take this into account, and while it ends up shifting significant control burden onto the touch display, players no longer need to watch two screens at once. Personally, I prefer the set-up on the Nintendo DS, but I can definitely see people liking the way *Solo Remix* handles things better. Other changes include improved graphics to support the higher resolution screens of iOS devices, a remixed soundtrack, and some interesting social features that ended up being stripped out in a later update. Eventually, an in-game IAP shop would be added that allows the player to buy cheat items and new music tracks. And of course, there was also that secret ending that broke more than a few hearts. Otherwise, the game was fully intact and missing nothing from the original Nintendo DS version, and although it was pretty pricey for an iOS game, a great version of an incredible game is certainly worth paying for, if anything is.

There isn't any part of *The World Ends With You* that I don't think is great. The mechanics are fresh and respect the player like few other games in the genre, the story is full of surprises and emotional sucker-punches, the visual

design is an intriguing sort of skewed reality that sells its setting well, and the soundtrack is simply unbelievable. Generally speaking, I'm not one of those people that listens to game music outside of the game itself, but I pretty much have to listen to this game's soundtrack every once in a while. It might be a bit too J-Pop for the tastes of some, but I think there's actually an appreciable amount of variety in the song selection. I love the game's battle system and the rhythm that you have to develop to fight efficiently. By alternating attacks between Neku and his partner, you build up a special synch gauge. When it reaches 100%, you can launch a powerful attack. You have to get in the habit of switching between moves, a process made even more important by how attacking works.



As you play, you'll collect pins. Most of these pins, when equipped, give you access to an attack of some sort. After you use them a set number of times in battle, they'll need to cool down before you can make use of them again. Your partner works similarly in *Solo Remix*, effectively acting as an extra attack pin. Ideally, you'll want to equip a balanced set of pins that includes weak attacks with quick cooldowns and stronger ones that need more time to recharge. Of course, equipping them isn't enough. You'll also have to use

them judiciously so that you aren't left helpless waiting for everything to charge back up. Attacks are launched in various ways, from taps to swipes to drawing shapes, a process that seems to work a lot better for me in the mobile version than in the DS version. Fighting efficiently isn't just a matter of survival, either. You're graded on your performance at the end of each fight, and your rewards increase the better you fight.

Your rewards are also dependent on what difficulty level you're playing on. You can change your difficulty setting whenever you like, making battles easier or harder as you see fit. The only catch is that if you play on easy, your rewards are going to be pretty pitiful. Playing on harder difficulty settings yields some pretty nice stuff, so you'll want to do that wherever possible. There's also another way to boost your bonuses. If you pull in a number of fights at once, you'll chain the battles together, significantly increasing the benefits if you can safely finish them all. Oh, and about pulling in fights? Other than boss battles and gathering required quest drops, you actually don't have to fight any battles in *The World Ends With You* if you don't want to. You have to initiate fights yourself most of the time by scanning the area and tapping on enemies. You can grind as much or as little as you want to. What a concept!



Fights aren't the only way to power up your pins, either. Let's say you don't have time to play the game for a while. Maybe even for a few days. When you load the game up next, you'll be rewarded with experience points based on how long you were away. Yes, you gain experience for not playing. It's a small thing, but it certainly gives you motivation to come back to the game if you have to put it down for whatever reason. It's interesting how many of the innovations in *The World Ends With You* have ended up in other games since its release, come to think of it. It questioned a lot of traditions in the genre and in demonstrating how much fun it could be to do things a different way, I'm pretty sure it inspired many others.

One of its other clever ideas that hasn't been picked up on is the brand system. Pins, equipment, and other items all come from one of several different brands. In Shibuya, both real and in *TWEWY*, fashion is king, but there seems to be a revolt every other day. In the game, popular brands are more effective, while unpopular ones are weaker, and every neighborhood has its likes and dislikes. You can actually affect these trends by using certain brands in battles, as the game cleverly teaches you during the first "tutorial" week. It gives you a great reason to collect and use different types

of equipment. Of course, some brands require more courage to wear than others, which is reflected by a stat in *TWEWY*. Shiki will wear almost anything, while Neku is a bit of a sour-puss at first. If you don't want to pay attention to any of that stuff, well, you don't have to. It's something you can take advantage of or ignore. If you just use the brands you want to use, things will eventually tilt in your favor due to how the game is set up.



I think it's great how even little things like the equipment you can use are well-integrated with the characters. The gameplay in *The World Ends With You* is fantastic and could hold up a game on all its own if it had to. Yet, the real strength of this game is in its story and characters. The story has the characters battling to survive a week in a subverted version of Shibuya. If they can make it through, they'll get the ultimate prize. Opposing them are the Reapers, who face similar stakes but with the goal being to take out the players. Behind it all is a mysterious character called the Composer who seems to be pulling the strings. But who is the Composer, and what is he or she really playing at? You'll have the answer to the first question by the end of the game, but the second one is perhaps a bit more ambiguous.

The hero of the story is Neku Sakuraba, an anti-social kid who likes to tune out the world by putting on his headphones. Although he doesn't remember much, he seems to have a deep mistrust of other people. Square Enix has used this kind of jerk as a lead before, most notably in *Final Fantasy 8*, and like that game, *The World Ends With You* is mainly about Neku's growth into someone you wouldn't like to toss out a window. Unlike that game, it actually works here. Whereas *Final Fantasy 8*'s Squall Leonhart just sort of stops being a jerk at the flip of a switch, Neku comes by it slowly and more naturally. Perhaps crucially, he's not the only flawed member of the cast. Everyone seems to be hauling around some baggage, and you're going to end up sorting through most of it on the way to the end. Trust and guilt are the main themes running through it all, and although the ending doesn't wrap up in a perfectly neat fashion, it's certainly an ending.

I'm going into spoiler territory in the next paragraph. If you don't want to know about some of the twists of the story, please scroll down past the next paragraph.



Although the whole cast is quite well-written and interesting, a particular

standout is Joshua, Neku's partner during the second week of the game. He will screw with your mind all the way through to the end, and just when you think you've got him figured out, he'll do something to upset your expectations. Personally, I don't think this game on the whole needs a sequel in the narrative sense, but if it does, it ought to be to explore Joshua a bit more. The first time I played *The World Ends With You*, I was surprised by the shocking reveal of Joshua's part in Neku's death. Then I was shocked even more when we got the whole story. The game uses your expectations of anime and game story tropes against you in order to give you surprises and emotional shots to the ribs. It's impressive how much the scenario writers managed to tease out of a fairly well-worn set-up. The final speech of the main game could easily come off as hokey, but the game truly manages to earn the right to deliver it.

All in all, it might be one of the better stories anyone from Square has told in a game. The brisk pace of the game's structure certainly helps keep the story going at a steady rate. You're never too far away from the next bit of resolution, which is important in a winding story like this. Indeed, *The World Ends With You* can be a very short game if you want it to be. I suspect most first-time players will see the end of the main game not far after the twenty-hour point. But if you want to keep playing, you can. The game certainly provides plenty of incentive to do so. From a bit of extra story to the bottomless pit that is trying to complete your pin collection, you could put dozens of hours more into the game. You don't have to, though. The main game is more than satisfying enough on its own.



The amazing thing for me personally is that I did not expect to like this game. Even though I live in Japan, I've got little patience for the Shibuya lifestyle. When it comes to J-Pop, I'm like Japan's version of the dad in the Twisted Sister video for *We're Not Gonna Take It*. I'm much older than the main cast, and they fall into types that usually really irritate me. And they did, at first. They really, really did. But that's exactly what the game wanted me to feel, it turns out. It was playing me the whole time, and that made the eventual course of the story even more effective. As for the music, well, that had to grow on me, but it certainly did. What I had initially written off wholesale as a particular subset of music I dislike ended up having quite a bit of variety to it. There's a bit of a hip-hop vibe to certain songs, a tinge of rock to others, and a whole lot of catchy, complex tunes all around. I walked into this game only interested by the good word of mouth, hoping I wouldn't have to suffer too much to get to the good stuff. I came out of this game calling it one of the best JRPGs I've ever played.

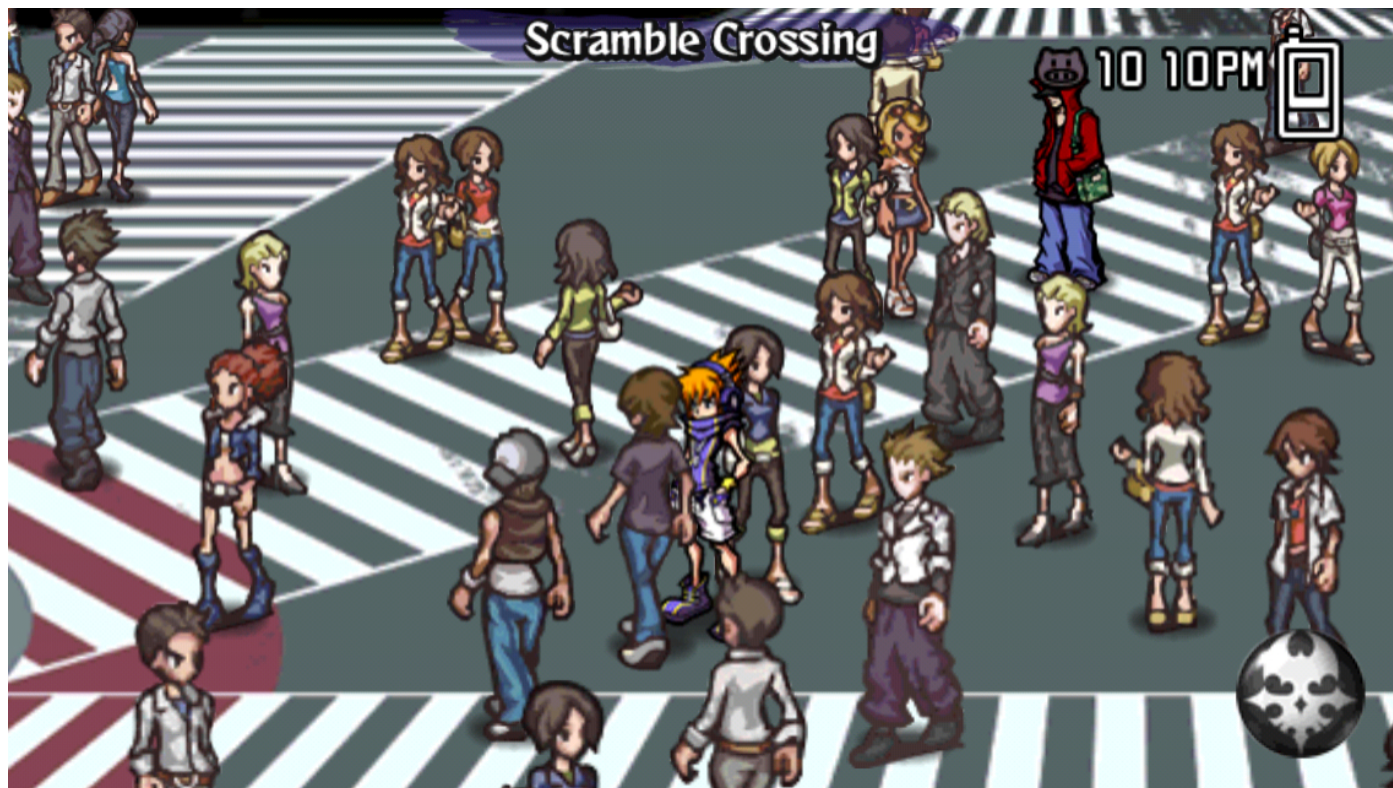
The iOS version does a good job of keeping the vision intact. I think it's easier to play in some ways, but I do miss the two-screen action at times. The vertical nature of Shibuya is lost in moving from what was essentially a

portrait orientation to a landscape one. It's not a heavy loss, though. My real gripes on the iOS version are few. First, it's one of those rare games that isn't just lacking a Universal build, but actually forces you to buy two copies if you want to play it on your iPhone and iPad. The iPhone version is inaccessible from iPads for what appears to be no good reason at all. Granted, there isn't any iCloud support anyway, so you wouldn't be able to transfer your save file even if you could play it on both.



Second, going from this last year's debacle with iOS 8 breaking the game for several months, the app seems to have very low priority at Square Enix. *Final Fantasy* games get fixed in a matter of days or weeks. *Chaos Rings* games, within a couple of months. But with *The World Ends With You*, we had to deal with a bizarre PR runaround and a fix that took nearly nine months. I think that situation did more to erode Square's trust with mobile gamers than anything else I've seen. It's working now, and it apparently works in iOS 9's beta, but I can't help but wonder if Square Enix will bother to fix it next time it breaks. With that in mind, even though this is an excellent version of the game, I'll never release my Nintendo DS version from my clammy meat-hooks.

That said, if *The World Ends With You* teaches us anything, it's that life can be mercilessly short and random, so we need to enjoy living in the moment as best as we can. If you've left this game stewing on your device waiting to play it "some day", make today that day. It's not terribly long and it's such an incredible experience, I'd hate for any of you to miss out on it. I had hoped it would be rewarded for its brilliance and become at least as successful as *Chrono Trigger*, but I suppose in the end it's in exactly the same place at Square Enix, isn't it? Great games don't always get their just reward, friends.



That's just my take on *The World Ends With You*, though. What do you all think of this one? Have you played both versions, and if so, which do you prefer? Please let me know by commenting down below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). We're also taking questions for our next **RPG Reload Podcast**, which we're recording later this month. You can send those to rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com, and we'll answer them on the air, as it were. As for me, I want to thank you all for a fun year. It's been a tough haul, but your words of encouragement never failed to pick me up even at the worst of times. Here's looking forward to many more years of **RPG Reload** enjoyment.

I'll be back next week with another interesting RPG. Thanks as always for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *Penny Arcade 3* [\(\\$2.99\)](#)